

A Future Without Fat

I've been on [the Shangri-La diet](#) long enough to convince myself that there's definitely something to it. Yesterday, for example, I spent all morning moving furniture (we're moving to a new apartment) and around lunch time I got invited to lunch at a favorite pizza place with a friend and I jogged all the way there. Normally, at this point, I'd be famished and devour half a pizza. This time, I wasn't hungry at all (but I had a slice out of politeness).

Of course, there's no reason my particular anecdotes should be more convincing than any others, but they are convincing to me, so I'd like to move from discussing the diet to discussing its implications. Weight and trying to lose it is a huge part of American culture and a system that makes doing it trivially easy will have far-reaching effects.

The most basic, it would seem, is more thin people. There's clearly an enormous number of people who want to lose weight. A lot are so desperate that they will try any number of painful and crazy tactics, from Slim-Fast shakes to Atkins meals, that are touted as helping. Obviously these people will try the diet.

But also a large number of people (like myself) who see themselves as too skeptical to fall for a fad diet or too lazy to jump through its hoops will try this diet, since it's both scientifically proven (or will be, after further clinical trials) and super-easy. And unlike Atkins, there are few concerns about nutritional dangers — the diet doesn't require you to change the balance of foods you eat, just the quantity — so a bunch more reasons not to do it disappear.

As it takes off, commercial products will soon follow — branded pocket-sized flasks of ELOO, for example. The media will do stories on this latest craze and the ideas behind it. Clinical trials will demonstrate its effectiveness and suggest areas for further research, which will lead to it being refined. And popular culture will likely try to deal with the results.

Among those results: lots of people you know getting thin. It's difficult to imagine what this is going to be like. The fat guy at the office won't be fat anymore. That cute-but-slightly-overweight girl you've had your eye on won't be slightly overweight anymore. Social dynamics will be seriously disrupted in a way that, to my knowledge, has no analog. People have gotten taller, and thinner, and prettier over time, to be sure, but never quite this fast.

The flip side of the drive to be thinner is the discrimination against those who are fat. American culture is simply vicious towards the less fortunate. You're poor because you're lazy, it says, and you're fat for the same reason. If only you got some exercise or ate better, you'd look fine. It's your own damn fault and there's nothing wrong with me looking down on you for it.

If the theory behind the diet is correct, however, this just isn't so. Fat people are that way simply because their body's set point is too high. That's not really anything you can blame them for and it's also something that, before the diet, was really hard to fix. They live with a burden of wanting to eat that thin people, with their lower set point, never have to deal with. And the entire time they've been struggling, they've been told it's simply their own damn fault. (As I noted, their situation mirrors that of the poor.)

Of course, it's unlikely our culture will ever notice the horrors its committed against fat people. Instead, the diet is likely to make it even more vicious. Now that there's a simple easy way to get thin, anyone who refuses to use it will be turned against with serious scorn. Being fat may become as much of a social rudity as being a smoker, with strangers feeling that they can lecture you about your unhealthy lifestyle in public. It'll be pure torture.

But, I have no doubt, it'll work. Sipping ELOO is much easier than quitting smoking and tons of people are doing the latter. And so the last few overweight people will be pushed to join the pack. While it's unlikely that obesity will be entirely eradicated, it's hard to imagine the last few hangers-on (perhaps those for whom the diet doesn't work or who can't do it for some reason) making up a significant sect of the population.

The diet book itself saves most of its vision for future generations who, it suggests, will never have to think about obesity at all because the new science behind the diet will allow us to build it right into our foods, so that we will simply never get fat in the first place. Certainly, at a minimum, children's set points will be regulated from a very early age (what parent wouldn't want to spare their child from fat-kid teasing?) and they'll likely never even consider another possibility.

To our children, obesity will probably seem like just another relatively-rare disease, like a learning disability or a speech impediment. They'll look back at movies from our time and think— well, actually, they won't notice anything because we've already removed the fat people from them.

You should follow me on twitter [here](#).

April 28, 2006